

“Christus Consolator”  
A Sermon Preached  
Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009  
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
with Special Reference to the Painting “Christus Consolator” by Ary Scheffer  
at the Minneapolis Institute of Art  
By the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

Did you hear about that painting that was donated to the Minneapolis Institute of Art by a Lutheran church in Dassel, Minnesota, population 1,233? This was in the news just this past week. The Rev. Steve Olson, pastor of Gethsemane Lutheran Church, was looking at some dusty old art prints stored in a janitor’s closet of the church when he saw a painting, a real painting—not a reproduction, but an original oil in a beautiful frame, the picture about two feet high by three feet wide. It depicted a seated Christ in the center with two groups of individuals on either side, and a woman bending over her dead infant at his feet, and a man stretched out in front and whose chains of slavery had just been taken from him. “Holy cow!” the pastor said...or perhaps not. But he did contact the museum to see if they would assess the value of what he had discovered. And sure enough, he had found a treasure. Maybe not a Rembrandt said the article in the Star-Trib, rather uncharitably, I thought, but a real treasure nevertheless. An “Antiques Roadshow” treasure is what the director of the museum called it.

What the pastor discovered was “Christus Consolator,” “Christ the Comforter,” a painting by a Dutch-born but Paris-trained artist by the name of Ary Scheffer (1795-1858). Scheffer was a fan of the Republican Christ. This is France in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of course, so we are not talking Republicans and Democrats, we are talking Républicans and Ultramontanes, those who championed French liberté, égalité, and fraternité, that is, and those who championed a Roman Catholic France, a France ruled from afar, from “beyond the mountains” and hence the name, Ultra- (beyond) montanes (the mountains). France at this time in its history was embroiled in its own version of the culture wars. The Républicans despised the Ultramontanes. They are reactionaries, they said. They want to turn the clock back to when the church made kings and emperors alike kneel before its authority. They do not admire the progress brought by our democratic ideals. They want to undermine that progress by imposing their superstitions and their doctrines. The Ultramontanes, as you might guess, had a harder case to make. Who would want to go on record opposing liberté, égalité, and fraternité? So they said progress wasn’t all that it was cracked up to be. They said that pagan secularists were corrupting the young and what everyone needed to do was recover the purity of the early Church and forget all this democratic lawlessness. What was needed was law and order, of the Roman Catholic kind.

Now, the interesting thing is, a kind of art went with each of these two positions. The Républicans favored a more naturalistic art, an art that emphasized movement and, in a philosophical sense, ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being.’ Delacroix was their hero, and

the downtrodden, the workers and the peasants were their favorite subjects. The Ultramontanes, by contrast, favored a more hieratic art, an art that was stiffer in appearance, that depicted somber-looking men and women proclaiming eternal verities. Their paintings had less movement. Stasis was the goal—a balance or equilibrium, that is, that while it did freeze all movement, it did so for the sake of a timeless truth, one coming down on the philosophical side of ‘being.’ Both camps thought the art of their opponents was the worst thing that had happened to art in a long time.

There is a curious twist to all of this, which is that Ary Scheffer used the artistic values of the Ultramontanes to advance the political causes of the Republicans. It’s true. Look at the painting reproduced on the back of your bulletin. In the center is a rather stiff, certainly static, hieratic Christ. He is not rigid in appearance, it is true, nor does he face you perfectly head on, which are the distinguishing traits of the style. But he does convey its more general characteristics, which can be summed up as “a nearly religious solemnity, majesty and ritual stiffness.” That’s a quote from the *Grande Larousse*, France’s last word in definitive statements. Movement in Scheffer’s painting is entirely missing. The figures are set in a shallow, sculptural space, the better to contemplate. Indeed, contemplate is what they themselves are doing. And the artist has created a divine spotlight, as it were, to assist us in the same exercise. It strikes the back wall, framing Christ’s face, but curiously, it does not highlight it. Instead, it singles out the dead infant at his feet and the older woman on the far left who, it turns out, is the artist’s mother. Ary Scheffer wants us to think about subjects with a strong, emotional appeal.

But his hieratic Christ does believe in the Republican cause. He consoles the downtrodden, the workers and the peasants. On the left, in the back row, they are an exile with his walking stick, a castaway with a piece of the wreckage in his hand, and a suicide with a dagger. By Christ’s right hand is Torquato Tasso, the melancholy late-Renaissance poet who was imprisoned as a madman. Opposite him are the three stages of a woman’s life, the eldest of which is represented by Ary’s mother. On the other side are the politically oppressed. From left to right they are a slave from antiquity, a medieval serf, a modern Greek, a black slave, and, stretched out in the foreground, an allegorical representation of Poland.\* A blond Mary Magdalene clings to Christ’s arm on his left. And the mother who has just lost her child is at his feet. The ensemble literally interprets the verse that was inscribed on the frame of the first version Scheffer painted in 1836, namely, Luke 4:18, “I have come to heal those who are brokenhearted and to announce to the prisoners their deliverance; to liberate those who are crushed by their chains.”

What to make of this effort to marry a stiff, hieratic Christ to a liberal democratic cause? The painting was a sensation when it was first displayed in 1836. In a sense,

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\* Michael Paul Driskel, *Representing Belief: Religion, Art, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Press, 1992, p. 37.

you couldn't miss it: the original was 6 x 8 feet. The Pre-Raphaelite artist William Holman Hunt, who also sought to paint timeless religious truths, despised Scheffer's French academic style, but he gave this painting grudging admiration. Its subject matter appealed to him. Vincent Van Gogh, whose paintings are nothing if not movement, felt the same; he kept a reproduction of the work in his apartment. And the champion of abolitionism and feminism in Europe and America, Harriet Martineau, albeit a thorough-going religious skeptic herself, nevertheless described the painting approvingly as "the consolation of eighteen centuries—that mysterious assemblage of the redeemed captives and tranquillized mourners of a whole Christendom."\*

Yes, well, the painting may have fired the imagination of its admirers, but "tranquillized mourners"? Is that what we've come to? I, for one, would greatly prefer it if my mourners had blood in their veins, not tranquillizers. The Christ I revere is far better known for offering compassion than numbing consolation. What good, after all, is consolation if it simply means sympathy for those who have lost something and *are never going to get it back*? Do we not proclaim a resurrection and does not that in some sense imply 'getting it back'? What's more, isn't righting the wrongs the consoling Christ points to the point of our contemplation? If all we ended up with was a monument to sorrow frozen in time, then something has been lost.

And yet, I must confess that I too have a grudging admiration for what Ary Scheffer has done—not his art, mind you. That's too academic, too sentimental for me. It's the perhaps impossible goal he set for himself: the employment of hieratic forms in the service of the downtrodden. I admire that goal. For me it is another way of saying he wants to join together heaven and earth, being and becoming, timelessness and time-fulness. As you well know, here at Grace-Trinity we have a formal, somewhat hieratic form of worship. At the risk of courting stiffness, I have sought this kind of worship in order to realize what Scheffer has sought, namely, an experience of God that both fears him—because his glory is so much greater than ours—and loves him—because he does indeed have compassion for us. It's an effort to join together the timeless being of eternity with the time-full becoming of us humans, and I often wonder whether it's a fruitless exercise. It seems like the two are inherently opposed. But then I am reminded of the way in which God himself bridged the gap: he gave us his Son as a perfect and acceptable sacrifice.

What is missing in Ary Scheffer's painting is a God who suffers, who sheds his blood that his own creation might be redeemed. It's not exactly the robust, blood-in-his-veins Christ I was looking for. I suppose that is something I'll have to think about. But neither is it Scheffer's bloodless, passive, resigned-to-his-fate Christ, however consoling he may be. The Christ who actually came to earth found a way of bringing

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\* Quoted by Patrick Noon, the Curator and Department Chair of Paintings and Modern Sculpture at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, in his website notes on "Ary Scheffer's 'Christus Consolator'" —[www.artsmia.org/index.php?section\\_id=350](http://www.artsmia.org/index.php?section_id=350)

heaven and earth together, and he did so by offering himself up for our redemption. That is movement enough for me. And contemplating it not only moves me to tears, it moves me to action as well. A “Love so amazing, so divine / Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

I am grateful to Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Dassel, Minnesota, for the gift of the “Christus Consolator” to the Minneapolis Institute of Art. It’s not a gift that will be a benchmark for me in my own faith journey, but it is a treasure nevertheless. And thinking about it has brought me nearer to the Christ I am anxious to serve. I hope you have had the same experience. The grace of God comes to us in all sorts of surprising ways, including what is buried in janitors’ closets from years past.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.